



WATER, WATER

Ran Ortner's Love Affair With The Sea

ARIANE CONRAD



Ran Ortner's Deep Water No. 1, oil on canvas, triptych, 72" x 288", collection of Le Bernardin, New York.

EVERYWHERE

Ran Ortner's work consists of paintings of the ocean on canvases that are as much as eight feet tall and thirty-two feet wide. They show no land, sky, boats, figures, or other reference points, merely what Herman Melville calls "this sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath." Viewers commonly experience strong emotions standing before his canvases. Some feel as though the paintings are not about the oceans at all, but are instead tapestries of our human condition.

Ortner was born in 1959 on the coast near San Francisco.

When he was five, his family moved to rural Alaska, where they lived in a remote log cabin. His father was an itinerant preacher who believed in living outside society. He regularly removed his children from school for three to four months at a time when the family traveled to South America, flying in their single-engine Cessna. It was in Ecuador that Ortner first surfed. At eighteen he set out on his own to race motorcycles and work as a motorcycle mechanic. At the age of twenty he had an accident that marked the end of his racing career and the beginning of his career as a full-time artist. "My mom painted," he says. "I saw

painting as slightly less dangerous than motorcycle racing.” In 1990 he moved to New York City, where he still lives.

Because of its subject matter, Ortner’s work is sometimes compared to that of the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, whose land- and seascapes were intended to humble the viewer, put human accomplishments into perspective, and reawaken our appreciation for the natural world. Ortner’s materials don’t differ much from Friedrich’s — or from Rembrandt’s, for that matter. Rather than use the titanium white paint commonly sold today, Ortner insists on using old-fashioned lead white, because of its superior translucence. He mixes it himself, using oxidized lead and walnut oil that he’s cooked on low heat for three days. (“You know, lead’s a potent neurotoxin,” I said as he whipped some up in front of me. “Yeah, don’t eat it,” he responded.) His other colors — grays, blues, and greens but also vermilions and umbers — are derived the old-fashioned way too, from minerals combined with oils of linseed,

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poppy seed, or walnut. Primarily he relies on complex shades of gray.

After three decades spent mostly alone in a studio or surfing, Ortner is something of a secular monk. His shelves are full of books on psychology, physics, philosophy, art, and literature. An adamant atheist, he nevertheless acknowledges the role of mystery in creativity, and he titled his 2008 joint show with conceptual artist Norman Mooney “Falling Short of Knowing.” This echoes something Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo: “What that word [artist] implies is looking for something all the time without ever finding it in full. It is the very opposite of saying, ‘I know all about it, I’ve already found it.’ As far as I am concerned, the word means, ‘I am looking, I am hunting for it, I am deeply involved.’”

In October 2009 Ortner won the first ArtPrize, a now annual competition funded by entrepreneur Rick DeVos, grandson of the cofounder of Amway. At a half million dollars, it’s the largest cash prize for art in the world and is awarded by popular vote in Grand Rapids, Michigan. After more than 334,000 votes were cast, Open Water No. 24 won the \$250,000 first-place prize out of 1,260 works. Prior to winning the prize, Ortner had been struggling to get by, sometimes borrowing money to pay his bills.

I met Ortner at the opening of his show “Deep Water” in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, where three of his massive canvases were on display. I asked him how long it takes to complete one. “Something on the order of three decades,” he responded with a laugh. “It takes a lifetime.” I vis-

ited him twice in his studio, in a dilapidated warehouse in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where stray cats roamed the building and printing presses filled the air with clanking sounds and chemical odors. Amid the canvases were a bevy of surfboards and two Triumph motorcycles — one a vintage model and one brand-new. The loft space was difficult to heat in the bitter New York winter, so we drank steaming cups of black tea to stay warm.

Conrad: What is it about the ocean that fascinates you?

Ortner: People often describe themselves as either a mountain person or an ocean person. I grew up in Alaska with both: mountains coming right down to the water.

In a sense mountains and oceans are similar. The mountains heave up with the collision of tectonic plates and then erode down, just as the waves rise up and then crumble. They just operate on different timelines. What I respond to in the ocean is that the waves break in synchronicity with the beating of my heart, the in and out of my breath. The ocean feels like a better subject for me to wrestle with.

In the ocean I see the collision of life and death: the rising of each wave is life insisting on itself, and in the trough I see death. These high points and low points are all part of the larger dance. You really feel the lament of the ocean, and at the same moment there’s a generosity, because the waves keep coming. These forces are working back and forth endlessly.

The paradoxes of life are all there in the sea. The ocean is often referred to as feminine, but the waves arrive in a masculine surge. As soon as they reach the full extent of their masculine expression, they shape themselves into a tube, a womb.

There are tempests and dark depths. You do not mess with the ocean. It will pummel you and chew you up. It is devastatingly brutal. And yet it can be luminous and delicate and tender. We clean our wounds there. What a reflection of our own impossible nature. We’re so brutal, so base, so horrific, and yet we have the capacity for such tenderness, such warmth, such empathy, such generosity.

Conrad: This fascination is what led you to paint seascapes?

Ortner: I had made kitschy little paintings of the ocean when I was a young man in California. By 2005 I’d been living in New York City for fifteen years, and my work had become quite reductive, exploring a kind of soulful minimalism. I was making large white panels with a single bend across the horizontal plane. The bend cast a shadow. It gave you the sensation of looking at a horizon — exactly what I see when I’m sitting on my surfboard waiting for waves. So it occurred to me that I should try painting the ocean again, all these years later.

Yet as quickly as the idea came to me, I discounted it as the most passé, sophomoric, nineteenth-century notion. It would get me laughed out of the New York art world. I could just hear the critics: “Go back to California, dolphin boy.”

It wasn’t until I read Thomas Merton that I came upon something that helped me. He wrote that there’s nothing as old and as tiresome as human novelty; there’s nothing as immediate and as new as that which is most ancient, which is always in the process of becoming. Wow, I thought: that is exactly

how I experience the ocean. Out of that ancient body comes this pulsing energy, like a metronome constantly marking the Now. I thought how powerful it would be if I could bring to painting even a fraction of the immediacy I feel when engaging with the ocean.

I knew I would have to avoid the pitfalls of becoming sentimental or clichéd. The rules of the contemporary art world are crystal clear: If reaching for the sublime or the epic, one must work with abstract painting or reductive, often monumental, sculpture. If one works with representation — realism — then one must use irony, social commentary, or wit in the work to avoid becoming saccharine or “decorative.” But I did not want the distance or the conceit that devices like irony evoke. I decided I would attempt a kind of tightrope act. I would paint straight — in a realistic manner — but I would attempt to be inventive with my perspective and the quality of immersion. I hoped to build the kind of emotional density I feel in the old masters.

If I could convey the ocean’s paradoxes, its ferocity and tenderness, in the same image, I could possibly awaken the viewer to a place where language drops away. By setting these massive, lush paintings in the artificial environment of the contemporary gallery, I intend to make it feel astonishing, to have an impact so immediate that it becomes what Kafka called an “ax for the frozen sea inside us.”

Conrad: Clearly you’ve spent a lot of time in the water. How has being a surfer informed your painting?

Ortner: No one is as intimate with the water as a surfer is. Sailors know the sea well, but a surfer spends 99 percent of the time on his or her belly with eyes at water level or just inches above it. From this perspective a twenty-foot wave appears a thousand feet tall. There is such vulnerability in being on a surfboard and literally having to go under these waves. You are picked up and tumbled around. Even experienced sailors don’t have a surfer’s knowledge of how waves form and move, where they feather and break or hold up and hesitate.

When you plan a surf trip, you spend ages consulting the annual weather patterns, the records of wave activity, the seasonal changes. Once you’re there, you look for the right circumstances, the right offshore wind direction, the right line of the swell. When everything comes together, you paddle out. The rides are not that long, and the speed is not that great, but the level of engagement is intoxicating. It feels as if the whole cosmos is suddenly aligned. It gives you a sense of something very right.

It’s the same kind of immersion I experienced racing motorcycles. In racing, the complexity escalates as the speed increases, and you become completely consumed with it. You accelerate more, more, more, and suddenly you break through into this other realm. The memory of those peak experiences can inform your entire life. It’s the same with meditation. And with painting.

There are moments in painting in which somehow you’re processing far more information than your mind is capable of handling. There’s so much layering going on in a painting, so many techniques. You have dark and light working against each

other. Edges can be hard or soft. There are cooler or warmer colors, and more or less transparent ones. Then there’s texture and proportion. After a while you don’t see the techniques anymore — it’s just all in there. The soup comes to a boil.

As painting gets more complex, it gains the same quietness that I’ve found in racing and surfing, where everything is happening so quickly that the demand for deep, internal calm is high. We can’t be at our most responsive unless our nerves are quieted. If there’s any noise on the lines, if there’s static or some kind of discourse happening within you, then part of your wiring is not available for the activity.

In my reading I’ve come across this again and again: that a person is most powerful when in a state of inner peace. The outside world recedes when I’m engaged in my work. I fall under the illusion that what I’m doing is all-important. It’s a wonderful illusion to have. I’ll take a break, and when I come back and look at the work, I’ll think, *Damn, there’s magic there.* There’s something I have brought back with me from the descent, a token of the experience.

That’s what makes art great — it’s a souvenir from these frontiers. It is a physical object that carries some of the magic back from the mysterious place.

Conrad: You once told me that it takes a “lifetime” to create a painting. Can you break that down for me?

Ortner: Obviously it’s not just the time spent painting one canvas. It’s the years spent acquiring the skill; it’s the ongoing process of contemplation. Something happens to time when you’re painting. You’re able to bring the span of your entire life into this one moment and into these few materials. All of your acquired understanding and wisdom come to bear on the work.

Some paintings come together so quickly they just fall off the end of my brush. Others are an incredible battle. What’s interesting is that sometimes the ones that are the greatest struggle can, in the end, appear so effortless. Earlier in my career, when I would wrestle with a painting, the result looked forced. I thought people would appreciate my hard work, this puritan idea that I’d given my pound of flesh, but that kind of painting is tiresome to look at. You don’t want to see someone’s struggle to gain approval. I find that a great work of art gives you a sense of relief: *Ah, yes, this place.* It feels as if it came forth fully formed.

Conrad: Are you the source of the painting, or are you channeling something beyond you?

Ortner: I make an effort not to mystify the process, because I think it leads to laziness. I believe in Thomas Edison’s formula: 99 percent perspiration, 1 percent inspiration.

Conrad: I notice you don’t ever mention talent, something innate, a gift you have been granted.

Ortner: Hell no. Michelangelo was accused of being possessed with demonic capacities. People said he’d sold his soul to the devil in order to be able to accomplish what he did. He said that if his accusers simply knew how much work was involved, it wouldn’t seem so magical to them anymore.

Talent is just the inner need. There is the Christian saying “Seek and ye shall find,” but this does not convey the intensity.



Ran Ortner at work in his studio. (Photo: Xavier Guardans)

I think of the Zen passage that says you should seek as if your hair is on fire and you're looking for water. Intensity plays a huge role in the creative process. The deep need summons the resources required to achieve a breakthrough.

Conrad: At the same time that you talk about perspiration and intensity being key, you seem to imply that there are more magical and mystical aspects to the process as well.

Ortner: I reference the mystics and spiritual seekers, but

in terms of how I've come to understand the mechanisms of creativity, it seems closer to science than to spirituality to me. You know, when I started making art, I was completely naive. After working for ten years, I realized that I didn't know what art was. I didn't have a clue. I had just been a young man trying to make lovely images and gain approval and make a bit of money. Then I had a breakdown. I relinquished my paintbrush and started reading.

I literally began with looking up the word *art* in the dictionary. I found that, in the etymology, it's related to connection; it shares its root with *arm*, the root meaning "to join." Art is an attempt to connect the sacred and the profane, dark and light, life and death. Art deals with all that is irreconcilable, the collision of opposites that we call life. But that didn't really tell me anything about how to arrive at it.

Then, systematically, I went through the seminal works on creativity. I intuitively knew that creativity was like an engine that drove the artistic process — but how, why? What exactly was it? Was creativity in science, mathematics, sports, business, or spiritual practice different from creativity in art? I read about people engaged in these fields. I studied the work of psychologists like Otto Rank and Rollo May on creativity. I read biographies, van Gogh's letters, Leonardo da Vinci, Rainer Maria Rilke. I read about the process of scientific discovery and the spiritual quests of seekers from all traditions.

Patterns emerged. A scientist and a monk and an artist are all looking for the same thing: some deeper reality outside themselves, or inside themselves. They are all involved in the same process: they have an inkling of possibility and are working to realize that potential. And there's a process to finding it. You have to build up a practice, a system of approach, a set of resources — and from there you can confront the mystery. Everything I read pointed to deep research and arduous work — and then, in a relaxed moment, the *aha*. The epiphany comes from the concentrated endeavor, not despite it.

So one ingredient is that intense effort I mentioned. Another ingredient is discernment, because sincerity itself does not cut it. To be sincerely wrong is nevertheless to be wrong. Look at terrorists who commit suicide bombings: it's hard to question their sincerity, but they lack discernment. If you make your way up a ladder that's leaned against the wrong structure, your ascent is pointless.

Another factor is humility. In our Western tradition we have this notion of humility as a kind of softness or weakness, but it's more like elasticity. Stephen Hawking refers to genius as "radical humility," for only when one truly and deeply does not know is one open to what is possible. I always think of James Joyce: "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience." Joyce is not championing a high-minded ideal, or an idea at all. He simply sets out to enter the fray, naked, without an agenda. If it takes James Joyce a million times, how many does it take the rest of us? Finally I think it is key what Einstein said about the importance of only ever having one simple, childlike question — never two. His was: How does the cosmos work? The psyche responds to basic, direct questions because we have so much energy that can move us in many different directions. Until we determine our proper framework, the right endeavor for us, we just mill around.

Conrad: Can you talk about the materials you use?

Ortner: My materials are literally mud. They are different colors of earth, especially the siennas and the umbers. And then there are some that are more exquisite, like lapis, a semipre-

cious stone that's ground up and put into paint. And all these elements are suspended in natural oils. It's so simple. It's colored mud. And what's the brush? A stick with some animal hair tied on it. In our age of technology I find it amazing that we still use these kinds of tools.

It makes the process like alchemy, the baseness of the materials in contrast with the transcendence we try to achieve with them. I love the notion that you can go to an art-supply store and buy a canvas and some paints and brushes as if it were a kit labeled, "Masterpiece. Some assembly required." All you have to do is put it together the right way. The potential in that is lovely. This is a childish activity, coloring and drawing, but if you can do it just right, the world is yours.

Conrad: Do you think art can be taught in school?

Ortner: Concepts and theory can be taught. Techniques can be taught. But art is also about the power of the human heart and the force of our creative nature. This is not studied and explored as part of the curriculum. When you ask collec-

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tors what they're *really* looking for, they say they want to fall in love; they want to feel. But the academics are leery of feeling, and they make the rules, so the contemporary art world is cerebral and favors conceptual approaches. I don't oppose the emphasis on intellect and on concept — in fact, I like it very much — but I do feel the passions are underrepresented. Humans are deeply emotional beings. We don't rationalize our way into love; we fall. We don't rationalize our way into the richest experiences; we get swept away.

We received the conceptual model from Marcel Duchamp, who is widely considered the father of the cerebral approach that characterizes twentieth-century art. It was Duchamp who invited the philosophers to take over the art world, who turned a urinal on its side and declared it art. He said that if you ever were to arrive as an artist, you would no longer make art. He himself left the scene and became obsessed with chess, which he told everyone was a purer endeavor.

But here's the thing: the bastard never stopped making art. For twenty years he worked in secret on his final piece, an installation called *Étant donnés*. It's a massive wooden door with two peepholes. Looking through them, you see a nude woman lying in a field with her legs spread, holding a gas lamp. What did he give us, at the end? He gave us sensuality and

nature, the erotic and the bucolic. A dreamy landscape. Despite the cerebral revolution he had launched, it was the most fundamental, ancient themes he pointed toward at the end.

Conrad: Do you identify yourself as a rebel, with the motorcycles and all?

Ortner: When I was racing motorcycles, I did feel a rebellious aggression, and I feel the same way when I'm painting. It's all a kind of warfare. There's just the question of whether you pick up the spear or the olive branch, the rifle or the paintbrush.

Conrad: I was thinking as well of the rules of the contemporary art world that you laid out, and your challenge to them.

Ortner: I am breaking the rules. It's dangerous territory. But I think the danger is part of what makes it interesting. Yes, I may fall prey to clichés, but it's also possible I'll avoid them. Certain subjects become clichéd for a reason: they have a power. They have acquired their status by working upon our

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collective consciousness. Cliché's bedfellow is sentimentality, which is also powerful. If you can approach both but avoid the saccharine sweetness and the delusional gloss, you can tap into their power. You can access the deeper truth.

I feel connected to El Greco and Goya, Velázquez and Rembrandt. People ask why I adore Rembrandt: Is it his use of chiaroscuro, the way the light emerges? Is it his inventiveness with paint? No, it's not any of those things. It is his courage married to the most incredible tenderness.

At the Frick Collection in New York they have a late self-portrait of Rembrandt, in which he painted himself in a golden robe. Not knowing anything about the painter or the historic period in which he worked, you can stand in front of it, facing his face, the set of your shoulders matching his, and feel an emotional accord. The face is so nuanced, all the muscles working in concert to form the expression so that you see the sustained emotion that is character, as da Vinci put it. We are the product of our experience. That's why there's such character in an old face.

You stay with this portrait, and you just feel this wry old bugger. You feel him in his irreverent smirk, one eyebrow raised at the utter "what the hell" of reality. You feel a deep friendship with this man. He looks at you in honesty. He has painted the broken old man that he is, and also the young lion of protest. It's the stuff of pathos. He knows that he is going to die. And he also knows, looking at you, that you are going to die as well.

Rembrandt starts his career in Amsterdam, a trading hub for silks and spices and coffee where there is lots of new wealth. His early biblical scenes and portraiture are in keeping with the religious rigor of the time and place. He becomes extremely successful and buys an expensive home and fills it with antiques: Roman armor, fossils, collectibles. He marries a woman he adores, and they have four children. He has everything. And then three of his four children pass away. His wife dies. His work is no longer fashionable. Amsterdam moves into the second generation of wealth, and the nouveau riche prefer the rococo, the intricate and overdone. Rather than follow trends, Rembrandt becomes more direct and brutal, his style rougher, the work more immediate. His paintings don't sell. He loses everything. But it doesn't discourage his inner need to be fully who he is, to confront it directly.

When he paints the self-portrait in golden robes, he's lost his home, is bankrupt, and is living in a poor part of town. Yet he paints himself as a king on a throne, because he has his empire of dirt. He has never been more sovereign. He is at the height of his powers, and he celebrates in the quiet squalor of his studio, outside the rhythm of the world entirely. Through his painting we're invited into this private moment. We share his mortality, his vulnerability; we share the courage required to withstand the full force of the storm and to say, *Yes, I will witness this*. There's such immediacy. It reveals who we are: our love of food and sex and our children and our aspirations. There is nothing modern about it, and yet, for me, it's as though it came off the easel this morning.

Conrad: His kingdom of one.

Ortner: Yes. The process is chastening. You have to confront the vast well of loneliness. Another thing I found in my reading was something da Vinci said: that if you're with another person, you're only half of who you are. You're not truly yourself unless you're alone. Jesus goes into the wilderness. Buddha sits under the Bodhi tree. Mohammed goes to the mountain. It's only in solitary moments that your social mask can drop away. You have the opportunity to be all-important, because you are all there is. Your consciousness is the beginning and end. You really are the kingdom of God at that point.

Conrad: Why then is public acknowledgment even important? It seems to mean a lot to you that you got the people's vote with the ArtPrize.

Ortner: Yes, receiving the ArtPrize was wonderful. While my painting was hanging in Grand Rapids, eight thousand people a day filed past it. You don't get that large an audience except maybe at the Met in New York. People came to me and told me how moving they found the work. They recognized the dark and ominous but also the tender and beautiful aspects. It was amazing. Beyond that popular resonance, however, part of my project is to have the institutions of the art world acknowledge what I am doing: providing a counterpoint to the conceptual, to convey humanity's ongoing intoxication with the sensual.

Conrad: So you want your work to outlive you.

Ortner: An artist's work is always an immortality project. Of course, even the monumental pieces of antiquity are just

tiny dots in the landscape of time. I've always found the existentialist approach appealing: to know that life is meaningless but to say, *Fair enough. I'll craft my own meaning.* I believe in the heroic journey. I see the utter vanity of it — it's pissing into the wind — but at the same time I also know that I've been touched by it in literature and art.

Our culture is where we archive the voices that sing — literally or figuratively — of the utter delight and exquisite tragedy of life. A culture is made by those who have a willingness to encounter life fully, to feel the storm of it and bring it back to us, so that we can put on Mozart's *Requiem* and listen to the fullness of the human heart.

We exist for only a fragment of a moment, but we're part of this larger entity called "humanity" that's lived for a few thousand years and has the potential to live for a few thousand more. As individuals we have little time to gain wisdom, but we're aided by this thing we call "culture," which is like a baton that's passed. The goal, as I see it, is to try to hand off a baton that has sustenance in it, so the next runner will find it useful.

Awakening is a collective effort. The more we can awaken individually, the more we will awaken collectively. We hand the baton down across generations. I've been touched by dead people, whether Dickens or Rembrandt, and we all have a capacity to leave a legacy. So the question becomes: What do we pass on to the next generation?

Conrad: If your paintings were never to make it into the top art institutions, would you consider yourself a failure?

Ortner: I went through a panic about that at some point, really fearing that I'd be penniless in my old age and living in a cold, drafty loft with only a mangy cat for company. But even in the darkest moments I was fortified by small tokens, from an endorsement by another artist I value to moments when I would see a shift in the work. A little reinforcement can sustain you for a long slog across the wasteland. It took years before the economic stress abated, and I had to understand that whether I was successful or not didn't matter. What happens to you or your work is largely out of your control. I think the primary drive has to be, as Shakespeare said, "to thine own self be true."

Art is not a skill contest, nor an innovation contest. Art is an honesty contest. If we can be precisely who we are, in the most intimate and candid and courageous way, we will start to connect to the universal. Our job as artists is to become powerfully personal in our work, and if we touch the source, the most central wound, the deepest of wells, then we actually touch the universal. In the compression of the intensely personal, heat is generated, and at a certain point it becomes expansive. The work goes from the intimately personal to what's personal to all of us.

Conrad: Do you have one simple question that guides you, like Einstein's?

Ortner: In David Sylvester's interviews with the artist Francis Bacon, Bacon refers again and again to wanting to touch the sore spot. The tenderest, deepest *ouch*. That idea of striking the heart of the heart, this elemental, base thing —

that is at the core of my work too.

Conrad: I know this is private, but you've mentioned that you witnessed terrible brutality as a child. Do you sometimes put your brush down and just cry?

Ortner: No. I usually cry before I pick it up. [Laughs.]

In music, you know, the blues are not about being morose; they are about celebrating and honoring the capacity to feel deeply. And the tragic aspects of life exist for all of us, regardless of whether our personal story is tragic. Sometimes people say to me, "I don't have a story like yours." But we all have a story like mine. That's why we identify with myth, with the martyr on the cross. We've all been weaned from our mothers. We've all come to know that we are mortal, that the body has dominion over the spirit. And we each live in a sealed container of the self and must deal with that enormous loneliness.

That's the brilliance of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's description of childhood in *The Little Prince*: It's not naive. It's not the innocent fairy tale of frolicking in a field of flowers. You speak to any child about his or her dreams, and you'll hear rich, powerful, tragic archetypes. Even children know death.

Nobody gets out of this life alive. None of us is a survivor. There are no survivors.

For me this is not nihilistic. This leads us to Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati* — to love our fate. Even though we die as individuals, even though the particular individual has crashed like a wave on the beach, there's still the larger whole. It's already a given that life's a failure, by which I mean that we come with an expiration date. We already know we're going to break down and crash. There's something liberating about that. This is our moment in the sun. Let's dance.

Conrad: There's a stereotype of the artist as a tragic figure, often a genius succumbing to madness and addiction. Do you find this to be true?

Ortner: *Life* is tragic. It's not something particular to artists. Life is also glorious, an astonishing opera that we're all living. We long for the eternal, but we're destined for the grave. Everything we know and love is in the process of passing out of existence.

But I think that making art is profoundly and fundamentally life affirming. To make art is to give, to pour yourself into life, so you don't die with the music still inside you. You give it to your culture.

Conrad: What would happen if you kept the music inside you?

Ortner: You would have a stilted life, a stillborn life in which you never fully became who you are.

Conrad: What would you say to a young person who does *not* want to become an artist?

Ortner: Lucky bastard. [Laughs.]

Conrad: When we ate together at a restaurant the other day, you said that you could probably talk for an hour about what you see in a glass of water. How do you do that?

Ortner: The trick is to get away from the concept of what something is. Try to step outside your idea of it, because our ideas are always what limit us. As soon as you have an idea about

something, you've boxed it in. It's something you can put in your pocket. And then you want to use it, to apply it. It's limiting.

Paradox is everywhere in art: You must work hard, but great art should look as if it's just fallen from the sky. The true way is without difficulty, but you have to approach your work as if it were a matter of life and death. If you don't need it with every fiber of your being, it's going to be passive, trite entertainment. It doesn't become great until it's the stuff of your last breath, the fullness of who you are.

Great work is atonement. It's an attempt to be worthy, to be valid — but not to the larger world: only to yourself. We're always looking to capture the whole world, but there would be no world for us if not for our individual consciousness. When we turn the lights off as an individual, the lights go off for the whole world — at least, as we experience it.

I'm talking in circles. That's why I'm not a writer.

Conrad: But you're good with words. Do you envy the more abstract tools of the writer?

Ortner: In writing one word follows another. There are metaphors, too, but one constantly has to maintain a linear structure, whereas I can achieve simultaneity in a painting. I can compress months of thinking and feeling into a single canvas and bring that to bear on the viewer in a single moment. There's a capacity for compression that language never achieves, except perhaps in the best poetry.

Conrad: So, no envy of the wordsmith?

Ortner: Oh, I envy everyone. I'm a greedy man. I envy

musicians. I envy filmmakers; their ability to work with music, language, and the visual simultaneously. I envy the athleticism and pure performance of dance.

Conrad: Do you believe that art can change the world?

Ortner: It doesn't matter much whether we rail against reality or endorse it; the universe is going to continue to unfold.

That said, there are profound moments in which the division between self and other drops away. It's Freud's notion of the oceanic feeling: you're swept away. And when that happens, you need to share it, to say, "This wasn't just a regular day. There was magic here! Did you see it?" So much of literature and art is the artist's way of saying, "Yeah, I saw it. Bloody hell."

It doesn't take ascending to heaven; it isn't supernatural. It happens right here, where the spirit meets the nature of reality.

There's a tremendous puzzle in it for me because of the violence in the world. It will never feel appropriate, the level of violence that I know to exist. You look at a black hole, which is this implosion where time itself is distorted and torn to bits. And the ocean can display such incredible violence. But somehow that doesn't begin to diminish the beauty that's all around us. If anything it makes the beauty more astonishing. As much horror as there is, there is still a place where flowers bloom and outside the front door it's spring. Out of this crack in the sidewalk, life comes again, God damn it. You can use all the weedkiller in the world, and it will still come. ■